

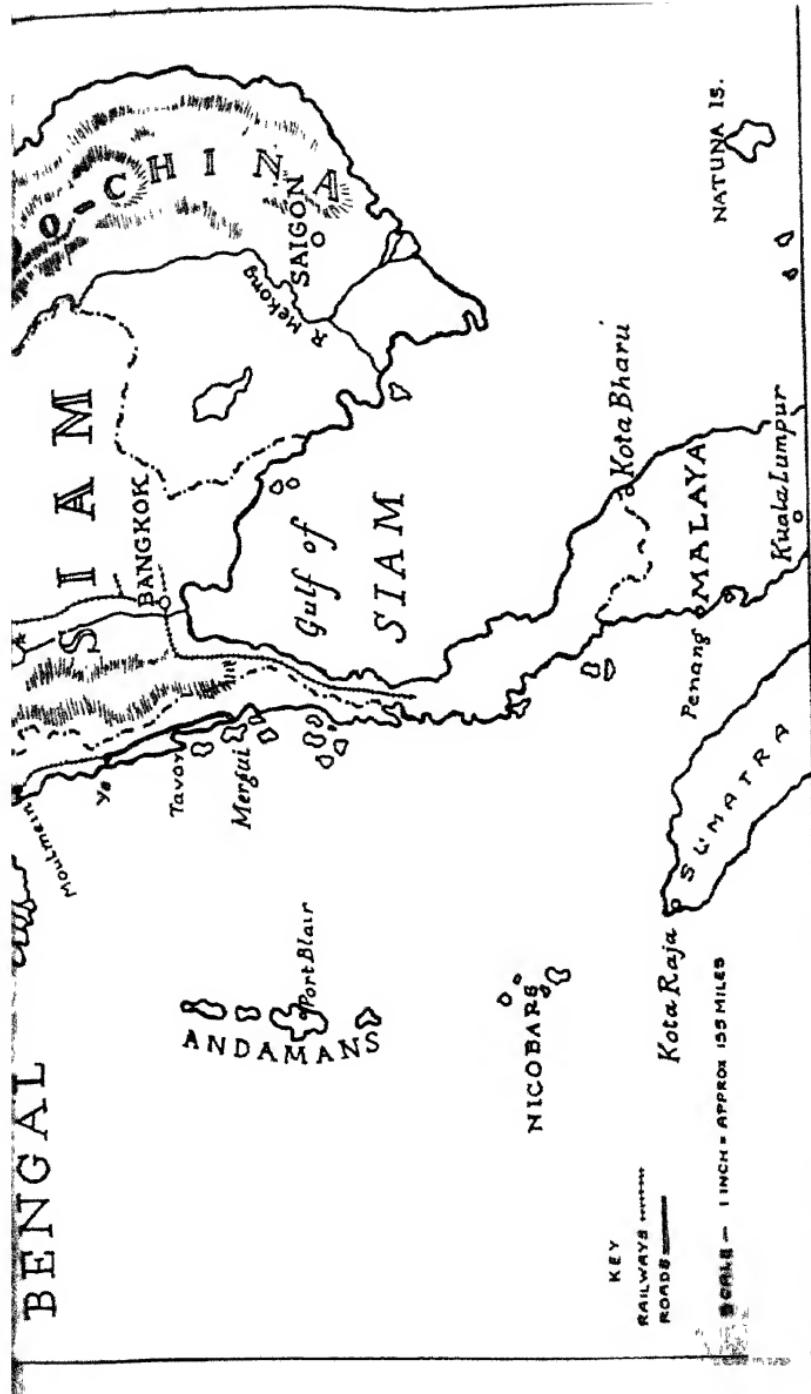


BURMA  
PAMPHLETS

No. 3  
Buddhism in Burma

by  
G. Appleton





## BURMA PAMPHLETS

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By

G. APPLETON

*With 4 illustrations and 1 map*

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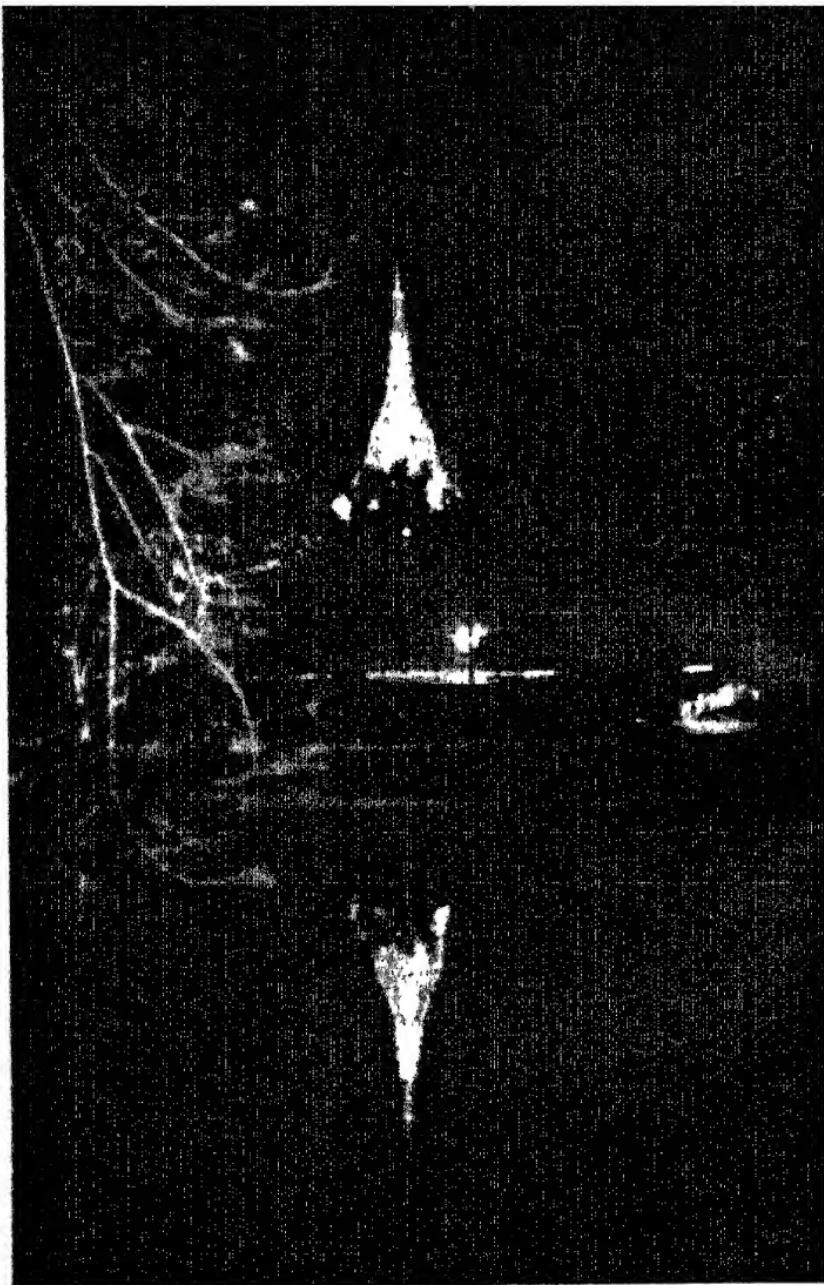
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THE SHWE DAGON PAGODA BY FLOODLIGHT

## BUDDHISM IN BURMA

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'It is as I suppose the fairest place in all the world.' Ralph Fitch, the first known Englishman to visit Burma, made this comment in 1585 on the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, evidently as beautiful then as it is now. Many a visitor from the West has echoed these words, as steaming up the Rangoon river he has caught his first glimpse of that graceful golden spire, presiding so completely and unshakably over the wharves and buildings of modern Rangoon. And as he walks about Rangoon or travels round the country he will see everywhere signs of the religion of the people—the graceful seven-tiered spires of the monasteries, the white tapering pagodas crowning every hill of any prominence, the yellow-robed monks with their shaven heads carrying their begging bowls in the early morning while devout Buddhist women bring their daily offerings of food. He will see the monks at other times, sometimes a group of novices sauntering along the road like idle youths in England on a Sunday afternoon, or forgetting their supposed detachment from the world at a football match, or whipping themselves up into un-monkly excitement at a political meeting. However difficult he may find it to gauge the spiritual and moral force of modern Buddhism, he will not attempt to deny that it has an important place in the life of the people. This impression will be all the

more strongly confirmed when he witnesses any of the great religious festivals, when streams of pilgrims from miles around crowd the pagodas, joining in the gay holiday spirit, drawn into the lavish hospitality, gazing in wonder at the amazing creations in bamboo, tinsel and paper of mythical creatures and figures, enjoying all the fun of a mediaeval English fair. It needs a Chaucer to do justice to these festivals and pilgrimages. As in his day, most of the pilgrimage is sheer holiday and most of the pilgrims want nothing more, but there is a deeper side, as there was in the shrines and aisles of Canterbury. To see this deeper side you must be humble enough to shed your shoes and stockings and climb bare-foot the well-worn steps to the shrines that cluster so higgledy-piggledy round the base of the pagoda. There you will find the more devout, mostly women, as in the Christian churches of the West, kneeling with prayerful hands before an image of the Buddha, asking maybe a husband or child or maybe something more spiritual ; or perhaps a tired old man, conscious that life is nearly over and that it is high time to pay serious attention to deeper things, telling his beads and finding refuge from a difficult, perplexing world in the three unfailing sources of refuge, the Buddha, the Law and the Church. If you have an understanding Burmese friend with you he may translate some of the prayers spoken aloud, and you will discover a wide charity in the prayers for all living beings divine and human, and in the generous sharing of the merit gained by the worshipper's prayer. And next door to this quiet shrine you will find a jostling crowd, lighting candles and offering flowers or gold-leaf at the shrine of one of the eight planets, for every Burman knows from the initial letter

of his name on what day of the week he was born, and does what he can to secure good luck from the stars. As ever, religion and superstition, closely intertwined. Once again the visitor will be puzzled and find it difficult to evaluate the part which Buddhism plays in the lives of the people.

### THE BUDDHA

The Burmese people (ten million of them) and their cousins the Shans (another million) are almost entirely Buddhists. They are followers of the Buddha, a great Indian religious teacher who lived in the sixth century before Christ. His clan name was Gaudama, and he was the son of a small rajah in Central India. He and his family were Hindus by religion, brought up in the religion of the *Upanishads* and of older religious literature and tradition. From an early age Gaudama had been troubled by the amount of suffering he saw around him, suffering connected with birth, disease, old age, death, running the whole span of man's life. Possibly too he was struck by the contrast between the extravagance and luxury of his court life and the squalor and poverty of the poor who lived in the mud huts around. That grinding poverty of the common people of India is still today the thing that strikes and appals the visitor from another country or the thinking Indian who loves his fellow men. This consciousness of universal suffering so worked in the mind of the sensitive young *yuvraj* that finally he left his father's court, his wife and new-born child, to try and discover for men a way of release from suffering. To him suffering was the primary evil and he felt an irresistible urge to discover its cause and so show men how to

escape from it. His search led him to sit under the leading *gurus* or teachers of his day, to study the various philosophical schools, to undergo every form of asceticism. But in none of these did he find any answer to his problem, and despairing of outside help he decided to seek his goal by himself and within himself. At last understanding came to him, as he sat in meditation under the Bo tree at Buddha-gaya. From that time on we know him no longer as Gaudama, but as the Buddha, the Enlightened One, the One who knows.

### THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

He summed up his discovery for later disciples in the Four Noble Truths about Suffering. The first was one that he had already recognised, that suffering is general and co-terminous with life. Suffering is involved in birth, sickness, decay, death, sorrow, in separation from the people and things we like, in having to live with people and things we dislike, in not getting what we want: all is suffering.

The second is the origin of suffering. Suffering springs from desire, craving, lust, attachment to people and things.

The third is the truth about the ceasing of suffering: namely, to escape from suffering crush out desire and craving, break all bonds of attachment.

And the fourth is the way to crush desire, by following the eight-fold path of right belief, right aim, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right contemplation.

Now there is no doubt that this is noble teaching of deep insight into human nature, and if put into practice

would produce noble character both personal and national. It may not rise to the heights of Christ's view of suffering as the raw material for spiritual maturity and victory, nor is it so far reaching in its discrimination as Christ's insistence that evil is the primary thing to be avoided rather than suffering. But it does get down to the root of much human suffering, and it is emphatically practical in its advice how to eliminate desire.

In practice many Buddhists have held that the Buddha insisted on the elimination of all desire, good as well as bad, and this has tended to make them passive, free from that selfless burning desire to get rid of social evils and to serve their fellow men. This is not seen in the Buddha, for after he had become enlightened, after he had completely repudiated selfishness and desire in himself and had thus attained Nibbana (Nirvana), he deliberately chose to live on in the world for the salvation of men.

### KARMA AND MERIT

We must not forget that the Buddha was a Hindu, a Hindu reformer certainly, who perhaps without intending it founded a new religion. Among the doctrines taken over from Hinduism by Buddhists none were more strongly held than those of karma and transmigration. The Buddha's emphasis on cause and effect was clearly seen in the four truths of suffering enunciated by him, and this has been elaborated into a dominant principle in Buddhism. Present suffering is thought to be caused by the demerit or guilt inherited from a former existence, while present happiness is the reward of virtue in former lives. Thus one's present state is determined by the law

of karma, and nothing can prevent the relentless working out of this law. In practice this tends to produce an attitude of fatalism, which discourages Buddhists from making any whole-hearted attempt to overcome misfortune or to indulge in philanthropic work to any great extent. One who is a leper or blind or a cripple is so because of his karma ; it is both mistaken and useless to interfere. The accumulation of guilt has to be worked off until the last farthing is paid, and then there will be no rebirth in the world, but the attainment of Nibbana. To Buddhists the Christian doctrine of forgiveness seems not only impossible but immoral.

The accumulation of merit becomes a chief concern to the Buddhist, and in Burma the good deeds most productive of merit are those connected with the support of the Buddhist religion. Thus to build a monastery or pagoda or to feed the monks is looked upon as much more efficacious than building a hospital or feeding the hungry, with the result that monasteries and pagodas are everywhere, but hospitals almost only where government has put up the money or Western missions have been at work.

So the doctrine of karma discourages a courageous attack on social evils or personal misfortunes—it is definitely nobler in the Buddhist mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, than to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them. But let it be said that in recent years there has been an increase in works of mercy and philanthropy, though the balance is still heavily weighted in favour of the more institutional forms of merit. And all through, the accumulation of merit is far too often the main motive of giving, together with its advertisement on foundation stones or dedicatory

brass plates. But there, in the West, the number of people who feature in subscription lists as 'Anonymous' is equally small.

Yet it needs to be said that the doctrine of karma looks forward as well as backward, although this is not often emphasised. For as much as the past determines the present, the present is going to determine the future. This should be an incentive to the Buddhist to a life of effort and virtue, so that having bravely overcome the handicap from past existences he may lay a foundation for his next cycle of life.

#### NO SELF

It might be thought that a belief in karma and a recurring series of lives in the world as animal or man indicated a belief in personality. But this is not so. It is not the same personal entity or soul that is carried on from one life to the other, but only the accumulation of demerit, the character that has been built up ; just as a new candle is lit from one that is about to go out, so the karma is handed on. There is no self, for human existence is thought of as being determined by the five *khandhas* or groups of body, feeling, perception, mental activity, and consciousness ; when these are combined together in operation life exists, when they disintegrate death takes place. This lack of belief in a continuing personality in man, of a controller of the five *khandhas*, of a being personally responsible for the past and the fashioner of the future, has not been an incentive to the development of personality or for attempting great achievements. Yet it does witness to the idea that the attainment of ideal character is a matter of long and painful effort, for which one short span of life is not enough. Even

the Buddha himself lived through five hundred and fifty lives (and there is a *jataka* or birth story for each one) before he attained to Buddhahood. Indeed one of the early symbols of Buddhism was that of a wheel, hinting of the long journey to be travelled and the recurring lives to be lived before the perfection of Nibbana can be attained. Mrs. Rhys Davids speaks of man as a wayfarer on the long road of becoming, undergoing change and growth until the process of becoming is complete and man reaches the ideal and so enters his Nibbana.

But the Burman is seldom logical, even in his religion, and his superstitious belief in the ghosts of the dead suggests that the doctrine of no-personality does not command very deep obedience. For when a member of the household dies the other members of the family will not go to sleep while the corpse is in the house but sit up with neighbours and friends playing games and talking all through the night. Often a notice will be placed on the grave warning the dead person not to return. Even in the more sophisticated circles of government service, when a man dies his name is published in the official gazette and permission is given for him to retire from government service. Once after taking the funeral service of a Christian student who had died, I was approached by his Buddhist school-fellows and asked to put a notice on the grave saying : 'Maung Kyaw, take notice that your name has this day been struck off the school register, so please do not return.' But this may be merely due to the survival of pre-Buddhist animist ideas. A similar thought is seen in the reluctance of Burmans to wake a sleeping person suddenly, lest his spirit or 'butterfly' should fail to return in time and so cause his death.

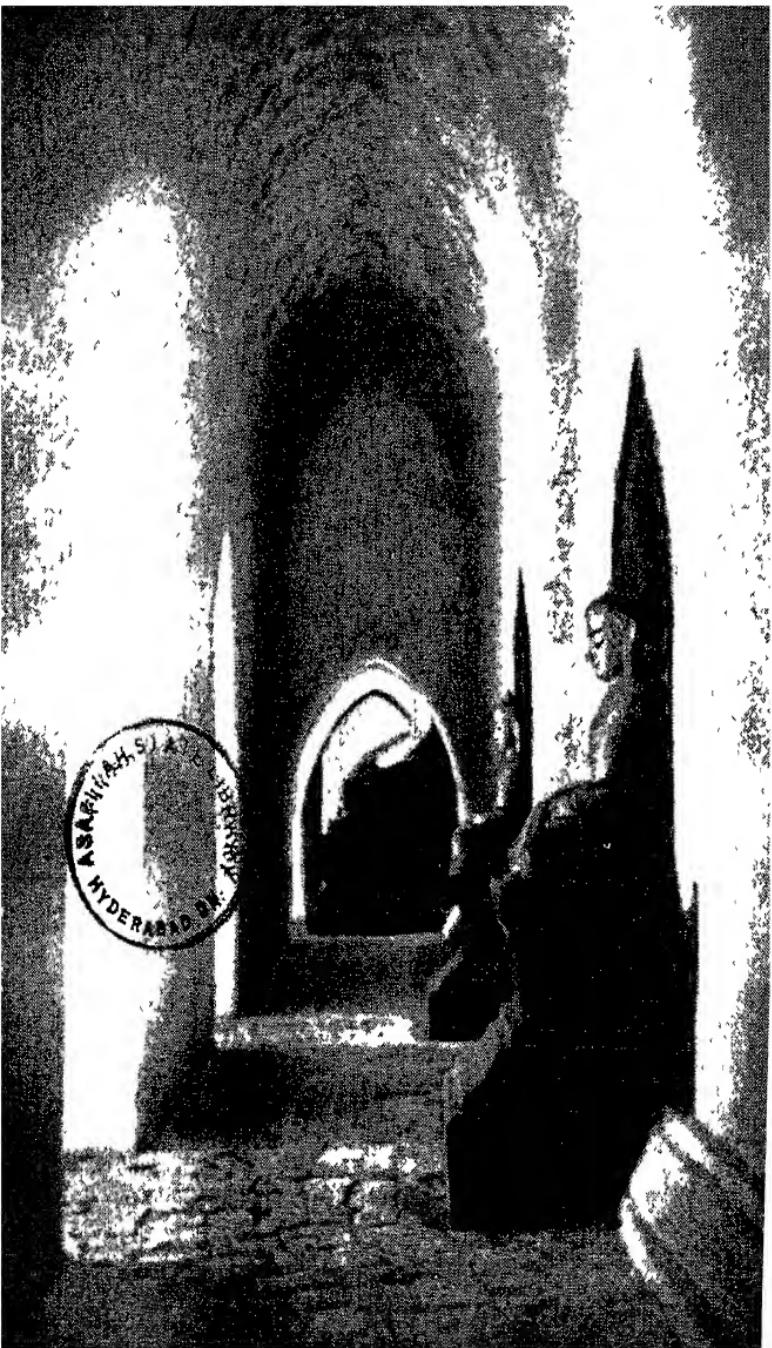
## IS THERE A GOD?

Just as Hinayana Buddhism in Burma, Ceylon and Siam denies the existence of soul or self in man, so it denies the existence of a Supreme Being, an Ideal Personality, an Eternal God, and it claims that this was the teaching of the Buddha. He certainly did not give any definite teaching about God, nor did he define him as a person. But this evidence is purely negative and at the most can only be cited as showing that the Buddha was an agnostic. It is possible that he did not regard the existence of God as provable one way or the other, and so did not regard it as of sufficient practical importance to spend much time on it. He was certainly questioned by disciples as to the existence of a Supreme Being and also as to the existence of the Ego. His reply in each case was non-committal, and this may suggest that in those days when barren metaphysical argument was so prevalent he did not want to commit himself to an answer which would have been equally distorted by both sides. His conception of God and the human soul may have been so deep as to be well nigh impossible to express in words. The view has been put forward that the Buddha was silent on this subject not because his idea of God was too small, but because it was too great and could not be intelligibly expressed, and so he did not wish to restrict himself to a sharp definition of the Deity. A consideration of his spiritual background and environment will give weight to this claim that he was not atheistic. It would be inevitable for one brought up on the *Upanishads* and earlier religious literature of Hinduism to believe in the existence of Divine Spirit, the source of all our intellectual powers.

and faculties as well as of all the powers of nature, the great *Atman* immanent in the lesser, finite *atman* of each man. To deny this would have been the surest way of arousing the opposition of every thinking religious Indian of his day, and we know that the Buddha's message attracted many who were sincerely seeking for reality. It is possible that this atheistic development took place after the Buddha's death and was one of the chief reasons for the expulsion of Buddhism from India. For it is strange that however strong Buddhism may be in Indo-China, Ceylon and China, it has failed completely in the land of its birth.

Whatever may be the truth about the Buddha and God, there is no doubt that Buddhism in Burma is atheistic. The three main articles of the Buddhist creed are *Dokkha*, *Aneissa*, *Anatta*—all is suffering, all is impermanent, there is no soul or self. According to this creed there can be no God. To the Burmese Buddhist it is not a case of weighing the evidence and taking one side or the other ; to him there is no question about it: the idea of God is not only not reasonable but it is almost laughable. That is his attitude in discussion and argument, but in real life he is more vulnerable. For not a few of them tend to put the Buddha in the place of God, while to many belief in spirits is a far more real thing than the absence of a Supreme Being. It would seem that the great majority of people, like Nature, abhor a vacuum, and if there is no God at the heart of reality they look round for someone or something to fill the vacant throne.

The Buddha himself did not claim to be divine. He





claimed to have found the way of escape from suffering, to show men the road leading to Nibbana ; he was a teacher and a guide, but not a saviour. By imitating his example they might become as he was, but it was by their own effort and in their own strength. When near death he is recorded to have said to Ananda. 'Therefore, O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the *Dhamma* as a lamp.' And his last words were : 'Decay is inherent in all component things. Work out your salvation with diligence.'

This lack of belief in a Supreme Being and in an undying personality in men is regarded by many friendly critics of Buddhism as its greatest weakness. Such a negative faith cannot supply a satisfying purpose for life, nor any real incentive to great achievement. Indeed life in the world is regarded as unfortunate and evil, something to be escaped from. The goal of Nibbana, too, seems negative and unsatisfying, especially to Western minds with their emphasis on activity. It is the most difficult of all Buddhist concepts to understand. Nibbana is at any rate the cessation of selfish desire, emancipation from the three cardinal evils of *lawba*, *dawtha*, *mawha*,—lust, ill-will, unreasoning stupidity , it is the end of suffering, the end of the weary recurring cycles of existence, and so the Buddhist speaks of the Great Peace. It must be something more than the peace of nothingness, but it is difficult to think so without a belief in personality. In one place the Scriptures say . 'the ceasing of becoming is Nibbana' ; you have ceased to change and grow because you have reached the goal, becoming and being are now

one, you have become that which you always aspired to be. Is this its meaning?

The most positive concept of it has been suggested by a modern Buddhist\* who compares Nibbana with eternal life as taught by Jesus, and says it is a quality of life possible now, the kind of life the Buddha had, free from self-centredness, lust, ill-will. This fits in with the possibility of attaining Nibbana while still in the world, and also with the refusal of the Buddha to dogmatise about what happens after the death of an *arahant* or Buddha.

### DHAMMA—TEACHING, LAW, TRUTH

There being no God in Buddhism it is obvious that there can be little in the way of worship or prayer. It ought not to be necessary to state that Buddhists do not worship the image of the Buddha. They sit and fix their eyes on the Buddha's image to remind them of that great compassionate teacher and the way of salvation which he taught ; that practice is an aid to meditation and concentration. Prayer too is not addressed to anyone ; it is aspiration rather than communion or petition. The nearest approach to worship is found in the reverence which every Buddhist renders to the Three Gems :

I go for refuge to the Buddha.

I go for refuge to the Dhamma (Law).

I go for refuge to the Sangha (Brotherhood of Monks).

We have already dealt fairly fully with the first of these objects of reverence in our consideration of the life

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\* Ananda Comaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*.

and teaching of the Buddha. We have now to consider the other two. The Dhamma is the body of teaching handed down by the Buddha to his disciples. On his deathbed, before attaining to the final Nibbana, he told them that the Dhamma was to be their light and guide, and that the fulfilment of the Dhamma would be the highest way of reverencing himself. ‘Whosoever, Ananda, be he brother or sister, lay brother or lay sister,—whosoever walks uprightly with the Dhamma—he it is that truly honours, reveres, respects, worships, and defers to the Blessed One in the perfection of worship.’

Buddhists in Burma have tended to identify this Teaching with the external law, written and contained in the *Tri-Pitaka*, the three ‘baskets’ of the Scriptures. These are : (1) *Vinaya* or Discipline, containing the rules of life, intended mainly for the monks. (2) The *Sutta-Pitaka* or Discourses, including the four longer books—The Dialogues of the Buddha, Further Dialogues of the Buddha, Kindred Sayings, Gradual Sayings, and a number of shorter ones of which the best known is *Dhammapada* or Verses on Dhamma. To the ordinary student of religion this collection is by far the most interesting of the three, though it does not make easy reading ; but patience will discover many gems of thought and religious insight. There is a good deal of repetition and a number of literary devices, which point back to an oral tradition, when the teaching was learnt by heart and handed down from one generation of monks to the next. All the main books in this section may be read in the English translations published by the Pali Text Society. (3) *Abhidhamma*, which describes the processes of thought and psychology of Buddhism. This is of a very metaphysical nature and

makes more difficult reading still. Strangely enough this is the most popular of the three ‘baskets’ in Burma, suggesting that Burmese Buddhists are more interested in the metaphysical side than in the ethical or religious aspects of their religion.

To the serious Buddhist the essence of the Teaching, contained in the Scriptures, will consist of several strands. There will be the insight of the Buddha into the cause of suffering, and the way of release in following the eight-fold path ; there will be an appreciation of the Law of Causation and its working out in the law of karma—regarded from these aspects Buddhism is certainly a ‘gnosis’, a way of knowledge and enlightenment. There will also be the ethical teaching of the Buddha, summed up for the ordinary man in the Five Great Commands, binding on every Buddhist. These are :

1. To kill no living thing.
2. Not to steal another’s property.
3. Not to commit any sexual crime.
4. Not to speak what is untrue.
5. Not to drink intoxicating drinks.

The highly moral character of Buddhism is evident from these five general commands. The first and the last need some comment. Not only human life is sacred, but all life, that of animals and insects as well. This is a logical development of the belief in re-incarnation, that long recurring cycle of lives progressing from humble forms of life and lower standards of character, to that final existence in the world when all guilt has been purged away, the debt of karma fully paid, and from which is no return ; Nibbana has been reached. So theoretically all

life is equally sacred, that of an insect or animal equally valuable with that of a man. But in practice Burmese Buddhists fall short of that ideal—as indeed the adherents of any religion fall woefully short of their highest aspirations. Murder and violent crimes are sadly prevalent—murder is so common that a murder trial is dismissed in the newspapers with a short paragraph ; it is not of front-page value as in the West. The crime statistics of Burma rival those of Chicago, so that fearless critics of their Burmese friends have said . ‘Instead of exalting all life to the value of that of a man the result has been to value the life of a man no more than that of an animal or insect.’ Yet the devout monk will strain his water lest he swallow a tiny insect, and the ordinary householder will allow every pup born to live and will refuse to put a pain-racked animal out of its misery.

The fifth command too is interesting in its complete forbidding of the use of intoxicating liquor ; in the case of strict Buddhists this extends to the use of brandy for extreme cases of illness or exhaustion. The strictness is probably due to a practical understanding of human nature ; in the East generally speaking, if a man drinks at all it is not for fellowship or the stimulation of flagging energy, but to get drunk, to forget his worries and difficulties ; he has no idea of moderation. And in that case abstinence is safer than temperance.

The ethical nature of Buddhism has been expressed in another way . ‘To abstain from evil , to fulfil all good ; to purify the heart—this is the teaching of the Buddha.’ To point out the failure of Buddhists to live up to this high level is no valid criticism of the standards of the Buddha, any more than the confusion and failure of the

West can be used as an argument against the teaching of Christ. In both cases it is a refusal to accept the highest standards or a failure to find the spiritual power necessary to put them into practice. If Christians lived up to the teaching of Christ, and if Buddhists put into practice the ethical teaching of the Buddha, both West and East would be radically different from what they are now.

A beautiful practice in Buddhism is meditation on the four *Brahmaviharas* of *myitta* (universal love or good-will), *karuna* (universal compassion), *mudita* (joy in the prosperity and happiness of all), and *upekkha* (equanimity, indifference to the ups-and-downs of life, non-attachment to the things of this world). The object of this four-fold meditation is not only to produce these four states in oneself, but to radiate to all living beings good-will, compassion, sympathetic joy, unshakable poise.

In the *Suttas* there is a lovely description of the whole duty of the Buddhist, and a version of this is known and loved by every Burmese Buddhist. It is called,

### THE SONG OF BLESSING

*One night a spirit came to the Blessed One and addressed him thus in verse :*

Many devas and men have pondered on blessings,  
Longing for goodly things. O tell me Thou the greatest  
blessing.

*The Lord replied :*

Not to follow after fools, but to follow after the wise ;  
The worship of the worshipful,—this is the greatest  
blessing.

To dwell in a pleasant spot, to have done good deeds in former births,

To have set oneself in the right path,—this is the greatest blessing

Much learning and much science, and a discipline well learned,

Yea, and a pleasant utterance,—this is the greatest blessing.

The support of mother and father, the cherishing of child and wife,

To follow a peaceful livelihood,—this is the greatest blessing.

Giving alms, the righteous life, to cherish kith and kin, And to do deeds that bring no blame,—this is the greatest blessing.

To cease and to abstain from sin, to shun intoxicants ; And steadfastness in righteousness,—this is the greatest blessing.

Reverence, humility, content, and gratitude,

To hear the Law at proper times,—this is the greatest blessing.

Patience, the soft answer, the sight of those controlled, And pious talk in season due,—this is the greatest blessing.

Restraint, the holy life, discernment of the Noble Truths, Of one's own self to know the Goal,—this is the greatest blessing.

A heart untouched by worldly things, a heart that is not swayed

By sorrow, a heart passionless, secure,—that is the greatest blessing.

Invincible on every side, they go who do these things  
On every side they go to bliss,—theirs is the greatest blessing.\*

To follow this noble life brings merit and helps a man on his long pilgrimage to Nibbana. Perhaps the acquisition of merit has become too dominating a motive for living the highest life, and as has been said earlier the most meritorious deeds are those connected with the institutional side of Buddhism ; yet in daily life you will find many a sign of thoughtful charity—often along the roadside you will see a tiny miniature house, high on posts like the living houses, built of wood, containing pots of drinking water, daily replenished by some kindly person for the refreshment of thirsty wayfarers ; or in almost every village a *zayat* or rest house where travellers may spread out their bedding rolls and sleep under cover ; or a village well provided by some villager who loves his fellow men. There are very few homeless orphans in Burma ; if the parents die a kindly neighbour will often adopt the children ; there is a whole section of traditional Buddhist law dealing with the rights of adopted children. Even the pariah dogs and birds are fed.

The spirit of toleration inculcated by Buddhism flourishes in Burma. Where there is intolerance it is due

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\* From *Some Sayings of the Buddha*, translated by F. L. Woodward, O. U. P. (The World's Classics).

not to religion, but to a sensitive nationalism, which regards Buddhism as the religion of Burma and therefore considers it unpatriotic of a Burman to accept conversion to another religion. And it must be said that sometimes missionaries in their approach are neither tolerant nor tactful, failing to appreciate the spiritual stature of the Buddha and the goodness and beauty of much of the Buddhist teaching.

A word perhaps needs to be said about the absence of any caste or class distinctions in Burma. This is due, I think, to the value and equality of all living beings implicit in the Buddha's teaching, although in his time caste distinctions in India had not yet hardened into their later rigidity ; they were there, but in their original purpose of practical division of responsibility and labour. Nor do we find the class distinctions so common in the West. Burmans meet one another and people of other races with a delightful absence of caste or class consciousness, with no complexes of superiority or inferiority.

So when the devout Buddhist begins his religious exercises with his homage to the Three Gems, in reverencing the second gem, the Dhamma, he has in mind some or all of the above ideas.

In recent years Mrs Rhys Davids, following up the principles of the higher and textual criticism which have been brought to bear on the Christian Scriptures, has attempted to get back behind received writings and traditions to the original message of the Buddha. To her mind the Dhamma is not an external code of teaching but more of an inner principle, an inner light and guide approaching the idea of conscience. She claims that originally this was akin to the idea of Holy Spirit. The handful of

Burmese Buddhists who have read her recent books will have nothing to do with this theory, yet strangely enough Mrs. Rhys Davids has some support of an historical basis, in the existence in Burma of a sect of Buddhists who call themselves *Paramats*, the name apparently meaning followers of the higher way as compared with the *Pinyats* or adherents of the Law. These *Paramats* believe in a Divine Wisdom, somewhat akin to the Logos idea of the Stoics, and later of Philo, with which men may enter into communion by purification and meditation. They have no use for monks or pagodas or external symbols ; the highest form of life to them is that of the hermit, who by fasting and prayer seeks to get into mystical relationship with the ultimate reality. Some of these hermits, independently of Christianity, have come to the conclusion that there must be an Eternal God.

### THE SANGHA

The third object of reverence and source of refuge is the Sangha or Community of Monks.

After his enlightenment the Buddha founded an order of monks, who under his training were to attain to *Arahants* or Enlightened Ones and then spread his gospel to men. His first disciples were five ascetic wanderers with whom he had lived for a time in his earlier search for truth. These were converted as a result of his first sermon at Benares, the *sutta* of turning the wheel of the doctrine. A little later two Brahman ascetics, Sariputta and Mogallana, joined him and attained quickly to the status of *arahants*. The Buddha made these two his chief disciples. Perhaps the best known of the early disciples is Ananda, who became the Buddha's personal attendant,

and by his faithfulness and affection earned the title of the 'beloved disciple'. He was spiritually the most immature of all the disciples and in the Scriptures is constantly asking questions which however result in the clarifying of the Buddha's teaching. He did not attain to complete enlightenment until after the Buddha's death in 483 B.C., but such was the reverence in which he was held that at the Council which followed the Buddha's death the version of the Dhamma which he recited (*Sutta-Pitaka*) was accepted as the standard. Besides a 'beloved disciple', Buddhism also has a Judas ; this was Devadatta, a powerful disciple who when the Buddha became advanced in age suggested that he should resign and that the leadership of the Order should be vested in himself. This was refused and from that time the enmity of Devadatta increased until finally he was expelled from the Order. Even then he plotted with a hostile rajah to kill the Buddha.

At the time of the Buddha's death there was a large body of monks and this continued to grow. At the present time there are over 100,000 monks in Burma alone. These must not be thought of as priests in the Christian sense of the word, for there is no ritual or prayer in Buddhism. They are primarily concerned with their own quest for enlightenment and Nibbana, though many of them expound the Law for the benefit of the laity, and all of them afford a means of gaining merit to their *dayakas* or supporters.

The original name of the monk was *Bhikkhu*, meaning mendicant or homeless one. But in Burma he is known as *Pon-gyi* meaning 'Great Glory', thus showing the great reverence in which he is held by the people,

who in speaking to him use a whole set of honorific words to describe his daily actions: thus he does not 'walk', he 'processes', he does not 'speak' but 'pronounces', he does not 'sleep' but 'reposes'.

The Brotherhood consists of two classes—the novices (*Koyin*) and the fully ordained monks (*Upazin*). The novice observes the five great commands binding on all Buddhists and in addition five more of a disciplinary and ascetic nature:

1. Not to take food after noon.
2. Not to sit on high seats or couches (this indicating pride and luxury).
3. Not to use personal adornments, unguents, etc.
4. To abstain from witnessing dancing, shows and plays (now-a-days more honoured in the breach than in the observance).
5. Not to accept or use money in any form.

Any male of over seven years of age may be ordained as a novice and in practice almost every Burmese boy enters the monastery for a period, it may be for a Lent, or a year or several years, or even for as short a period as a fortnight. Any fully ordained novice may leave the Order at will at any time. Until he becomes a novice a Burmese lad is not looked upon as having come to maturity either in religion or in membership of the nation.

'In commemoration of the Great Renunciation, the entry of a boy into the Novitiate is frequently made the occasion of one of those public festivals which delight the play-movement- and color-loving Burmese heart. Even poor parents will often save money for some time (a very hard task for the generous and, indeed, thriftless Burman)

in order, to give their sons a lavish *Shin-pyu* (making a Holy One), as the festival is called ; and the *Shin-pyu* of a rich man's son is often a very grand affair. Personifying the Prince Siddhattha, the boy is dressed in regal robes and crowned ; and, after receiving all his friends in state, the little Prince rides round the village, mounted, if possible, on a white horse, in memory of white Kanthaka, the Bodhisatta's steed. A procession is formed, and amidst a great display of royal canopies and insignia, hired for the occasion from some theatrical company, it marches to the air of stirring music round the village to the Monastery walls. Here the Princeling must dismount and music must stop, for the little mystery-play has reached the point corresponding to the arrival of the Bodhisatta at the River Anoma, when He put off His royal robes and donned the ascetic's garb. Entering the compound, the lad bathes and is clad in a temporary plain white robe ; and, so attired, makes his request, in the ancient Pali formula, that the ordaining Monk will, 'out of Compassion, and for the sake of the Attainment of Nibbana's Peace', grant him the Yellow Robe. The Monk, assenting, gives him the parcel of Three Robes, placed ready to his hand. The lad retires and robes himself in these, after having his head shaved ; he then returns to the Monastery, where the ceremony of Ordination is completed by his recitation of the vow to observe the Ten Precepts of a Novice.\*

In the monastery the novice acts as attendant to the monks, studies his religion from the sacred books, and joins in the morning and evening religious exercises of the Order.

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\* Ananda Metteya, *The Religion of Burma*.

To become a full monk a man must be at least twenty years old, must be free from debt, government service, and certain diseases and deformities. He can only be ordained by a senior monk of at least ten years' standing in the presence of a chapter of at least ten fully-ordained monks. The office of ordination handed down from earliest times is read out by the senior monk in Pali, and sometimes in Burmese as well, as an understanding of the classical religious language of Buddhism is not likely to be an accomplishment of the new monk so early in his career. For five years after ordination the new monk remains under the instruction of an *Achariya*, and when he has acquired ten years of seniority in the Order he becomes a *Thera* or Elder and can then confer ordination on others and act as the abbot of a community of monks.

The monk has to observe no less than 227 rules, his whole life being regulated for him. There are four deadly sins which involve immediate expulsion from the Order—the breaking of the rule of chastity, the taking by fraud or violence of anything not given to him, the taking of human life, and the laying claim falsely to arahantship or the possession of any superior or super-human powers. He may own only eight possessions—the three garments composing the Yellow Robe, his begging bowl, his girdle, his water-strainer, a razor to shave his head, and a needle to repair his robes. The novice too may not own more than this.

There are two important monastic practices which have survived from the time of the Buddha. The first is the *Uposatha* or fortnightly chapter at which the list of offences given in the *Vinaya* is recited and confession is made by each monk of infringements. The second is the

keeping of the Buddhist Lent (*Wa*) which covers three months of the Rainy Season ; this period is to be devoted to religious retreat, and travelling is forbidden In Burma the Buddhist Lent is opened and closed by two great festivals which in their social nature and hospitality do much to compensate the pleasure-loving Burmese for the quietness and sobriety of the period between.

Every morning the younger monks and the novices accompanied by some of the boys of the monastery school, 'sons of the monastery' as they are called, go out in silent procession to beg their daily supply of food. Each monk or novice carries a black earthen or lacquer begging bowl and as the procession comes to the house of a known supporter it stops and a member of the household will come out and put an offering of rice in each bowl and perhaps a portion of curry in the receptacles carried by the attendant boys No word will be spoken, either of request or thanks, for the monks are doing the laity a favour in allowing them to acquire merit, and eyes will be discreetly cast to the ground for the monk must not look upon a woman, lest fleshly lust be aroused.

On the return to the monastery the food will be reheated and eaten before noon. But nowadays in some of the less strict monasteries the food collected is given to the boys and the dogs and a more palatable meal is eaten which has been given by wealthy supporters and cooked while the monks are out on their morning round. The rest of the day is passed by the monks in studying the Scriptures, teaching the younger monks and the novices, or in the practice of meditation.

In the old days, before mission and government education became so general, there was a school attached

to almost every monastery, in which the boys of the village were taught reading, writing, some elementary arithmetic and the principles of their religion. The teaching methods in most of these schools were primitive and the boys learnt most of what they did, by heart, shouting out the lesson after the teacher. Yet the result was that almost all Burmese boys learnt to read, making Burma the most literate country in the East. In addition they received a good deal of instruction in the Buddhist religion at an impressionable age and this combined with the custom of every boy becoming a novice for a shorter or longer period helps to explain the hold which Buddhism has on the people of Burma.

In Burma it is assumed that to carry out the eight-fold path and extinguish all the fires of craving and desire, it is essential to abandon ordinary life in the world and become a monk. Thus it is not uncommon for an elderly Burman, who has retired from public service and whose family is grown up or otherwise sufficiently provided for, to forsake the world, take the monk's robe and spend his declining years in that religious self-culture which advances him on the road to Arahantship and Nibbana.

This insistence on the necessity of leaving the world and becoming a monk is not seen in the teaching of the Buddha, although he undoubtedly held that the monk was freer to pursue the goal. One day he was asked by a layman: 'Must I give up my wealth, my home and my business enterprises and, like you, go into homelessness in order to attain the bliss of the religious life?'

And the Buddha replied: 'The bliss of the religious life is attainable by everyone who walks in the noble eight-fold path. He that cleaves to wealth had better cast it





away than allow his heart to be poisoned by it, but he who does not cleave to wealth, and possessing riches uses them rightly, will be a blessing unto his fellow-beings.

'I say unto thee, remain in thy station of life and apply thyself with diligence to thy enterprises. It is not life and wealth and power that enslave men, but the cleaving to life and wealth and power.'

'The Dhamma of the Tathagata does not require a man to go into homelessness or to resign the world unless he feels called upon to do so ; but the Dhamma of the Tathagata requires every man to free himself from the illusion of self, to cleanse his heart, to give up his thirst for pleasure, and lead a life of righteousness.'

'And whatever men do, whether they remain in the world as artisans, merchants, and officers of any kind, or retire from the world and devote themselves to a life of religious meditation, let them put their whole heart into their task ; let them be diligent and energetic, and if they are like the lotus, which, although it grows in the water, yet remains untouched by the water, if they struggle in life without cherishing envy or hatred, if they live in the world not a life of self but a life of truth, then surely joy, peace and bliss will dwell in their minds.'

### DECLINE IN THE BURMESE SANGHA

In recent years the Brotherhood of Monks in Burma has suffered a serious decline, both in the reputation and respect in which it is held by the laity and also in its influence on the moral and spiritual life of the country. This is not entirely due to internal causes. For in the days of the Burmese Kings the Sangha was strictly

controlled through an archbishop or *Thathanabaing* appointed by the King and responsible for the monastic discipline throughout the country. With the annexation of Upper Burma in 1886, the British Government with its recognised principle of neutrality in religious affairs, allowed this important office to lapse and so since that time there has been no co-ordinating or controlling nucleus in Burmese Buddhism. The result has been that the discipline in individual monasteries has depended entirely on the presiding abbot: in some cases strict standards of moral life and monastic discipline have been preserved, in others there has been sad laxity in both those spheres. In recent years monks have involved themselves in politics, especially some of the younger ones and have helped to stir up violent nationalistic feeling. The monastery too has often been looked upon as a sanctuary for Burmese criminals and the ease with which a man may become a novice has encouraged this. In Rangoon for example a big block of monasteries in Godwin Road was often a source of anxiety and trouble. There is obviously a need of some official register of monks and a stricter scrutiny of those who present themselves for the novitiate. It has been suggested that in the reconstruction of Burma after the war the ancient office of *Thathanabaing* should be revived and that he should be assisted by advisory bodies of trusted monks and devout laymen. It is possible that something more far-reaching than this is necessary and that Buddhism should be made the state religion of Burma with an annual grant for furthering truly religious objects. In Siam the King is regarded as the sole defender of the faith and many of the monasteries are under his direct control and in these a stricter rule of life is observed.

It must not be thought that this unhappy state is completely acquiesced in, for many monks and leading laymen deplore it and there have been efforts to remedy it. Only a year or two ago a bill was to have been presented to the Legislative Council by a leading Buddhist to provide some control of the Sangha but was withdrawn at the last moment as the mover was violently threatened while on the way to the Council Chamber.

And in every generation there have been monks of outstanding piety and learning. Twenty-five years ago the saintly Ledi Sayadaw became a great spiritual force in the life of the people, and in many a town in Lower Burma his teaching is still remembered and practised. In recent years there has been the Monyin Sayadaw who has organised a powerful Buddhist centre near Monywa; wherever he goes, crowds flock to hear him for he speaks simply and directly to the moral needs of the people, and where this is so there will always be plenty of people eager to listen and learn. After the Burma Rebellion in 1931 many Buddhist monks toured the affected areas preaching peace and goodwill, and in the rehabilitation of Burma after this war the monks will have a still greater part to play.

But it must be admitted that there is a real doubt as to whether or not a small country like Burma can support as many as 100,000 monks. Economically such a large number is a serious drain on the country, and it is to be questioned whether it is morally healthy for so many men in the prime of life not to be doing some really creative work. In the Christian monasteries of the Middle Ages, under the influence of St. Benedict and his order, the twin principles of work and prayer were accepted, and

from the monasteries there came out not only religion and learning but much practical inspiration for the development of agriculture and industry. If the Buddhist rule could be modified to include manual labour what a difference it would make to the thinking and life of the people generally ; possibly with the spiritual aristocracy doing manual work the rising generation would come to see that manual work was at least as praiseworthy and valuable as a routine job in a government office, which seems to be the extent of ambition at present.

To pursue the high moral life laid down by the Buddha, to point men ever to the rooting out of all selfishness, to live worthy of the great reverence in which they are held by the people—these are no mean aims for the monks of Burma, and their achievement in any degree would augur a spiritual and moral revival among the people of Burma, already one of the most friendly and loveable races in the world.

We may close our study of the monks with words taken from the Buddha's charge when he sent them out on their mission : 'Go ye, O Bhikkhus, and wander forth for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, in compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain, for the welfare of gods and men. Proclaim, O Bhikkhus, the Doctrine glorious, preach ye a life of holiness, perfect and pure.'

#### HOW BUDDHISM CAME TO BURMA

The popularly accepted tradition is that Buddhism came to Burma through two Talaing merchants, Taposa and Palika, who were converted by the Buddha and to whom he gave eight hairs of his head which he instructed

them to deposit in the Theinguttara Hill beside the relics of the three Buddhas who preceded him. They returned to Burma and searched far and wide for Theinguttara Hill, which was finally pointed out to them by the aged Sule *nat*. Here they enshrined the hairs in a pagoda which came to be later known as the Shwe Dagon, one of the most sacred Buddhist shrines in the East. A pagoda was later built to commemorate the *nat* who had pointed out the sacred site ; this is the present Sule Pagoda which stands in the centre of the city of Rangoon. A more probable tradition is that which states that Buddhism was brought to Burma by two monks, Sona and Uttara, who were sent out by the Third General Council, summoned under the patronage of the great Emperor Asoka, who flourished in India about 250 B.C. After his victorious war against the Kalingas, in which 150,000 men were killed, Asoka filled with remorse and horror was converted to Buddhism. Shortly afterwards he entered the Sangha and for the rest of his reign ruled on Buddhist and philanthropic principles. After the third Buddhist Council missionaries were sent out to Kashmir, Ceylon, Egypt, Greece, Syria—to these places vouched for by Asoka's Stone Edicts, tradition has added Burma and tradition is possibly correct. The monks Sona and Uttara are said to have landed at Thaton, which was then a seaport, though now some twenty miles inland.

Little more is known of the progress of Buddhism in Burma until the 11th century A.D. when it was so flourishing at Thaton that there were thirty sets of Pali Scriptures in the royal library there. Meanwhile a decadent form of Buddhism had penetrated into Central Burma, probably one of the Tantric magic-working sects which had sprung

up in India during the period of Buddhist decline and had entered Burma by the overland route from Tibet. The priests of this degenerate faith were called *Ari* and indulged in superstitious and immoral rites. The King of Pagan, Anawrahta, had been greatly influenced by a monk, Shin Arahan, who presented himself at his court and before long became the King's chief religious adviser. At Shin Arahan's suggestion Anawrahta sent to the King of Thaton asking for copies of the Buddhist Scriptures, and when this request was insultingly refused, attacked and sacked Thaton and carried off all the Sacred Books as well as much other booty. It must have been a triumphant procession which returned to Pagan, thirty-two white elephants loaded with thirty sets of the Scriptures as well as many sacred relics. The Scriptures were housed in the *Ti-pitaka-taik* or library, which may still be seen at Pagan. The result of studying them, combined with the pressure of Shin Arahan, was that Anawrahta decided to adopt the pure Buddhism of Thaton as the state religion. The superstitious *Ari* were given the choice of joining the orthodox Sangha or of becoming lay officials of government. From that time on Anawrahta became a Burmese Asoka and, ably aided by Shin Arahan, set in motion a whole era of religious reform, temple-building and philanthropic projects.

The Pagan period, 1044-1287, was the golden age of both secular and religious history in Burma. Numerous pagodas were built which for architectural design and strength rivalled the Norman cathedrals which were being built at the same time in Europe, and in the opinion of some equalled them in beauty. Even today deserted though it is, Pagan with its sixteen square miles of

pagodas and religious buildings is one of the wonders of the world.

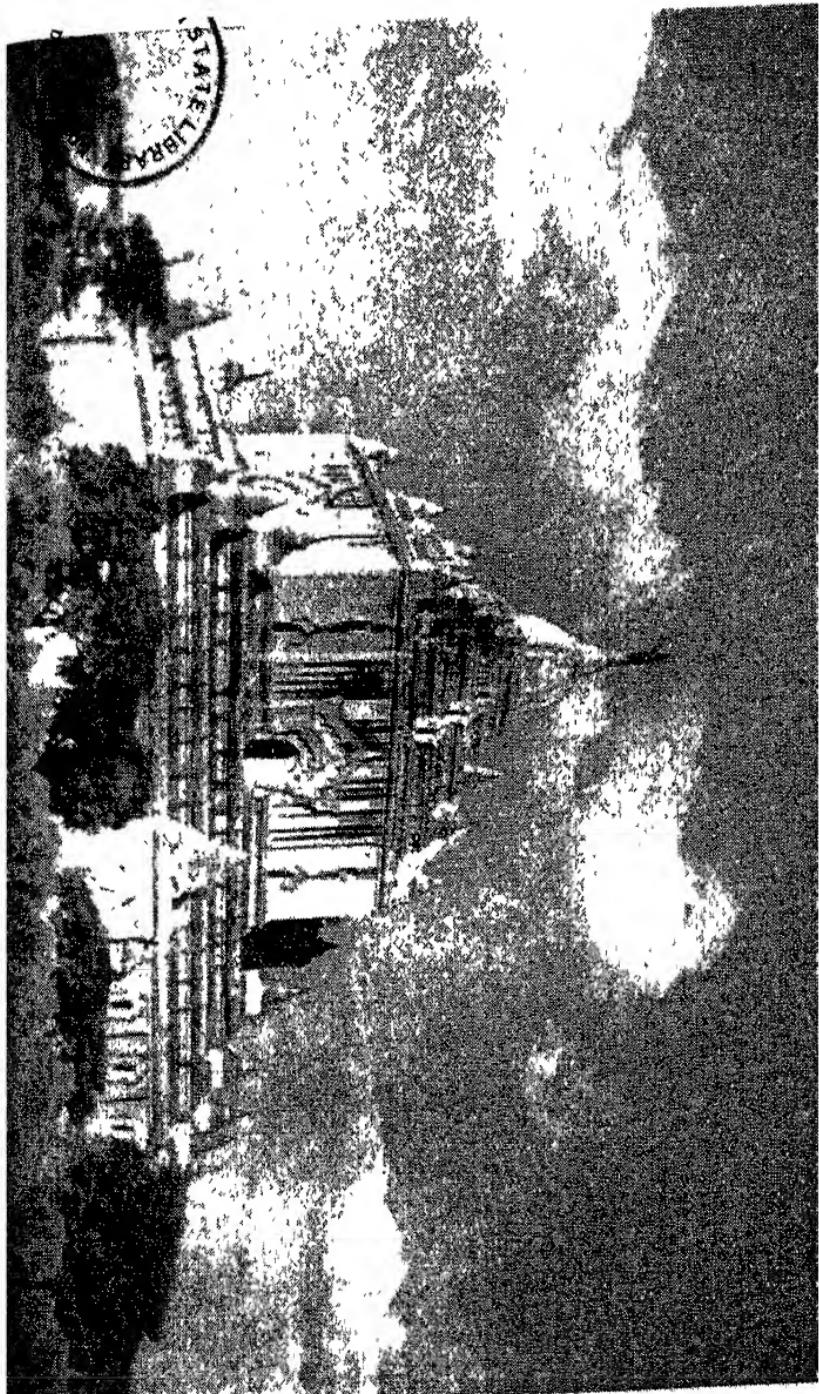
In 1071, the King of Ceylon, whose country had been ravaged by a bitter Hindu persecution, sent to Anawrahta for a set of the Scriptures and for monks to secure a chapter for valid ordination. Anawrahta sent these, and in return asked for the sacred Buddha Tooth, Ceylon's priceless relic. This was not unreasonably refused, but his messengers were given a duplicate, for the original Tooth had the faculty of miraculously and conveniently reproducing itself to provide for the expanding religion. Its arrival at Pagan was the occasion of another triumphant procession: the king himself waded out into the river and bore the sacred relic on his head to be enshrined in the Shwe Dagon pagoda with other Buddha relics. Anawrahta's action in sending monks to Ceylon was repaid more than once in the history of Burmese Buddhism, for when the number of genuinely ordained monks became so low as to threaten the true succession, missions were sent from Ceylon to ensure its unbroken continuance.

Anawrahta's successors continued his policy of religious patronage and temple-building. His son Kyan-sittha, 1084-1112, was as fortunate as his father in having for the whole of his reign Shin Arahan as Primate and adviser. A mission was sent to India to restore the shrine at Buddha-gaya, where grows the sacred Bo tree under which the Buddha had become enlightened. Kyan-sittha also built the lovely Ananda pagoda, in the Western aisle of which can still be seen two life-size figures of himself and Shin Arahan kneeling at the feet of a gigantic image of the Buddha.

Shin Arahan died in 1115 at the age of 71 ; it is to him more than to any other person that we owe the establishment of the pure form of Hinayana Buddhism in Burma, and the era of pagoda-building and inscriptions which he inaugurated was the most creative age in Burma's history.

The Pagan kingdom broke up in 1287 ; for years it had been weakening and none of its later kings had been men of any great note, but the immediate cause was the invasion of the Chinese to whom Pagan had been nominally tributary for some time. Harvey in his *History of Burma* pays the following inspired tribute to this dynasty of temple-builders : 'The legacy of their fleeting sway enriched posterity for ever. It was they who made the sun-scorched wilderness, the solitary plain of Myingyan, to blossom forth into the architectural magnificence of Pagan. . . To them the world owes in great measure the preservation of Theravada Buddhism, one of the purest faiths mankind has ever known. Brahmanism had strangled it in the land of its birth. In Ceylon its existence was threatened again and again. East of Burma it was not yet free from priestly corruptions. But the Kings of Burma never wavered, and at Pagan the stricken faith found a city of refuge. Vainglorious tyrants build themselves sepulchres, but none of these men has a tomb. . . These men's magnificence went to glorify their religion, not to deck the tent wherein they camped during this transitory life.'

The break-up of the Pagan kingdom was followed by a period of Shan invasion. These were naturally years of confusion, and Buddhism shared in the general decline. Religion languished, the clergy split up into sects, though





pagodas were built none of them could rival even the lesser temples of Pagan. It was not until Damma-zedi, 1472-1492, that a revival came. He built some beautiful pagodas at Pegu, modelled on the temple at Buddha-gaya to which he sent a mission. But his most important work was the mission of twenty-two monks which he sent to Ceylon in 1475. These monks received valid ordination from the monks of the ancient Maha-vihara monastery founded in 251 B.C., and on their return they transmitted these orders to the clergy throughout Burma, thus giving some measure of unity to the Sangha as well as reviving religion. Among the monks who went on this mission was Buddhaghosa, who translated the earliest Burmese law-book the *Wareru Dhamma-that*, based on the laws of Manu brought by Hindu colonists to Burma centuries before. He also wrote various commentaries. Burmese historians have identified him with the famous Buddhaghosa who was born in 390 and translated many of the Scriptures and commentaries from Singalese into Pali, the author of *The Path of Purity*. But Burmese historians have a naive way of identifying places and personalities mentioned in the Scriptures and commentaries with places and personalities in Burma, without however much real foundation. The truth is that the early history of Buddhism in Burma has been lost, and writers convinced of its long standing in the country have sought to make good the lack.

As the history of Burma unfolds itself with its continuous internal wars and its periodic invasions of Siam and Arakan, Buddhism still retains its influence. Kings build pagodas, dedicate slaves, endow monasteries with paddy land ; sometimes under the influence of the religion a king will abandon some cruel custom, as when Bayin-

naung, 1561-1581, after conquering the Shan States suppressed the custom of slaughtering 100 each of men and women, 100 horses and 10 elephants to be the retinue on his last journey of any *sawbwa* who died.

With the 16th century came adventurers and traders from the West, first the Portuguese, then the Dutch, French and English. Captain Alex. Hamilton, who visited Syriam in 1709, pays a striking tribute to the humanity and hospitality of the old-time priesthood of Burma : 'When shipwrecked mariners come to their Baws, they find a great deal of hospitality, both in food and raiment, and have letters of recommendation from the Priests of one Convent to those of another on the road they design to travel, where they may expect vessels to transport them to Syriam ; and if any be sick or maim'd, the Priests, who are the Peguers chief Physicians, keep them in their Convent, till they are cured, and then furnish them with letters, as is above observed, for they never enquire which way a stranger worships God, but if he is human, he is the object of their charity.'

In 1784-5 King Bodaw-paya invaded Arakan and brought away the great Maha-muni image of the Buddha. It was taken on rafts to Sandoway and thence over the Taungup pass to Padaung below Prome, and thence up the Irrawaddy to be enshrined in the Arakan pagoda at Mandalay, a tremendous triumph of transport. Bodaw-paya also acquired what he believed to be the Buddha 'Tooth from Ceylon. At home he attempted to reform the monks. His religious and secular triumphs evidently turned his brain, for he thought himself destined to be a world conqueror, and not content with this claimed to

be the final Buddha. This latter claim however was firmly rejected by the monks.

In 1871 King Mindon summoned 2,400 clergy to Mandalay to attend the Fifth Buddhist Council. The Fourth had been held in Ceylon nineteen centuries previously. The assembled monks following the custom of the earlier councils, recited the Buddhist Scriptures, and the accepted text was engraved on 729 marble slabs erected in the Kutho-daw pagoda. Although only Burmese clergy had been invited Mindon received the proud title of 'Convener of the Fifth Great Synod'. As a memorial of this council King Mindon presented a new spire to the Shwe Dagon pagoda, coated with gold and studded with jewels, costing £62,000.

With the annexation of Upper Burma in 1885 Buddhism ceased to be the state religion of any part of Burma. Harvey in the *Cambridge History of India* has the following interesting and pungent paragraph: 'The King was head of the Buddhist Church. His chaplain was a primate who prevented schism, managed church lands, and administered clerical discipline, through an ecclesiastical commission appointed and paid by the King. The primate prepared the annual clergy list, giving particulars of age and ordination, district by district, and any person who claimed to be a cleric and was not in the list was punished. A district governor was precluded by benefit of the clergy from passing judgment on a criminoius cleric, but he framed the trial record and submitted it to the palace, the primate passed orders, unfrocking the cleric and handing him over to secular justice. In 1887, the primate and thirteen bishops met the commander-in-chief, Sir Frederick Roberts, offering to preach submission

to the English in every village throughout the land, if their jurisdiction was confirmed. The staff trained by the English in Lower Burma for two generations included Burmese Buddhist extra commissioners who could have represented the chief commissioner on the primate's board. But English administrators, being citizens of the modern secularist state, did not even consider the primate's proposal ; they merely expressed polite benevolence, and the ecclesiastical commission lapsed. Today schism is rife, any charlatan can dress as a cleric and swindle the faithful, and criminals often wear the robe and live in a monastery to elude the police. As Sir Edward Sladen, one of the few Englishmen who had seen native institutions as they really were, said, the English *non-possumus* was not neutrality but interference in religion.'

### WOMEN IN BUDDHIST BURMA

The attitude of the Buddha to women was one of distrust and suspicion typical of monastic sentiment all the world over. This is brought out in some of his conversations with Ananda who frequently advocated the cause of women.

'Master,' says Ananda, 'how shall we behave before women ?'

'You should shun their gaze, Ananda'.

'But if we see them, Master, what are we to do ?'

'Not speak to them, Ananda.'

'But if we do speak to them, what then ?'

'Then you must watch over yourselves, Ananda !'

Clearly the Buddha regarded women as the most attractive and dangerous of all those snares which arouse the physical senses. Yet it can be claimed that he called

on men and women alike to abandon the sexual nature and set out on the long road to spiritual maturity.

He did not refuse the hospitality and alms of devout laywomen and there are a number of well-known women who were allowed to minister to the needs of himself and the Sangha and so gain merit towards their own ultimate enlightenment.

In response to repeated pleas from Ananda the Buddha at last gave permission for women to enter the Sangha and an order of *Bhikkhuni* or Sisters was founded. But his permission was given reluctantly and safeguarded by regulations which made it clear that the eldest ordained sister must behave with extreme humility even to the most junior monk. But this gave them their chance to show their worth and, as Mrs. Rhys Davids comments, 'it is clear that, by intellectual and moral eminence, a sister might claim equality with the highest of the fraternity'. The claim was made good in the *Psalms of the Sisters* in which the songs of those who attained to Arahantship are preserved. This fact, generally ignored, shows that the attainment of Nibbana is possible in this life even to women.

In Burma the Order of the Sisters has not been maintained, although there are *meithila*, 'nuns' so called, who live a semi-monastic life, a half-way house between the old Order of Sisters and the domestic life common to most women. They wear a special robe of their own, possess a certain amount of property, do their own marketing and domestic work. They are not held in anything like as much esteem as the monks. A Burmese saying runs: 'Only if you have lost your child, or your husband has left you, or you have failed in trade, or got badly into debt, will you become a nun.'

As to the women of Burma generally, theoretically their only hope is to be reborn as men so that they may become monks and so attain *Nibbana*. But in practice the women of Burma are the freest of all the women in the East, and although tacitly paying lip service to the superiority of men (the Burmese woman always addresses her husband or any other man as *shin*, lord), yet they are very much the equal companions of men. In Buddhist Law if husband and wife separate each takes the dowry brought by him or her to the marriage, together with half the increase that has been added during the years they have lived together. The Burmese women are intelligent and capable ; many friendly observers regard them as having more backbone and character than the men. They take an active share in the management of the home, much of the petty trade of the country is in their capable hands, while in the villages they share with their men-folk the work of planting and harvesting.

As in the West, the women are the chief supporters of religion. They are much more regular in their visits to the pagoda, more often in prayer before the images of the Buddha, more generous in the daily support of the monks.

### BELIEF IN SPIRITS

All the indigenous races of Burma have come from the mountainous regions of the Tibetan and Chinese borders, pressing down the great river valleys towards the fertile land of the south, where nature is generous and life easy. Before they settled in Central or Southern Burma the Burmese people were animists as the hill tribes still are to-day. They worshipped the spirit of the spring

or river, the tree spirit or *nat* of the great banyan tree, they propitiated the spirits of nature and those responsible for sickness and disease, and they feared the spirits of the dead. Much of this still survives to-day in spite of the fact that Buddhism is the accepted religion of the country.

The word *nat* may have two meanings in Burmese. It may refer to the *devas*, the spiritual beings who inhabit the six Buddhist heavens in which virtuous people are rewarded with happiness after a good life on the earth. These beings display great solicitude for the pious state and welfare of mankind, but you need not bother about them too much for they will not do you any harm.

Secondly, the word *nat* may refer to the spirits of nature, the spirits of the air, the forest, the water, the household *nat*, the *nat* of the village. These are generally, though not always, regarded as malevolent ; they may do you either good or harm, and so they must be propitiated by regular offerings. There is a *nat-sin* or shrine for the local spirits in each village, in most homes a cokernut decorated in red cloth is hung up for the guardian *nat* of the home ; at every big banyan tree there will be a shrine for the tree-spirit at which gold leaf, candles, flowers will be offered. All these spirits are to be feared because of their potentiality for doing harm.

There are also powerful spirits connected with certain localities, the spirits of people who in past generations have met with a violent end and are now believed to roam around the scene of their death seeking whom they may devour. The early legends in Burmese vernacular histories deal largely with this type of *nats*. Some of the most popular festivals, though centring round the pagodas, are

in origin *nat* festivals. In 1856 at the founding of Mindon's new capital of Mandalay, pregnant women were buried alive under the posts of the main gates, the idea being that their spirits would haunt the place and do harm to any who came against it with evil intent.

Among the Karens and Kachins animism plays a more powerful part than among the Burmans, but even among the latter the *nats* are to be reckoned with in everyday life, so much so that it has been claimed that animism is the real religion of Burma and that Buddhism is only a veneer.

Anawrahta, the founder-patron of Burmese Buddhism, realised how difficult it would be to detach his people from their old beliefs and practices, for in the great Shwe Dagon Pagoda at Pagan, he enshrined images of the thirty-seven *nats*, saying, 'If they will not come for the new religion, they must come for the old'.

It should be understood that this worship of the spirits is quite contrary to Buddhism ; it is tolerated rather than permitted. Its existence side by side with Buddhism is thoroughly illogical, but then the Burman is illogical in more ways than one : as a Buddhist he confesses that 'all is suffering' but in practice he is a gay, pleasure-loving, happy-go-lucky fellow. Perhaps too Buddhism may satisfy him as a philosophy of life and as an outlet for social activity, but it is cold and impersonal, whereas his contact with the *nats* is more satisfying to that inner religious sense of dependence and need.

This belief in spirits is accompanied by a natural faith in omens. There are all kinds of auspicious and inauspicious omens, certain days on which it is unlucky to commence a journey or undertake a new project. And inevitably there are plenty of experts, who profess to be

able to interpret the signs or foretell the auspicious days. These *be-din sayas*, astrologers, *ponnas*, will for an appropriate fee tell your horoscope or advise you as to lucky days, or tell you the whereabouts of a lost person or piece of property. Superstitious practices, relics of primitive magic, love potions, still survive and are well patronised. The best monks frown on all this, urging their people to protect themselves by reciting the usual religious formula or verses of the Scriptures, against which the wills of the *nats* etc. are harmless. But superstition and the desire to know the future are so far too strong even for the disapproval of the monks, who have perforce to tolerate what they would fain banish.

### FESTIVALS

Mention has already been made of the festivals, which are more of the nature of great social holidays. Many of these are the patronal festivals of pagodas, some are even *nat* festivals, not all of them have any connection with Buddhism. The New Year Feast or *Thin-gyan* known to Western people as the Water Festival is almost the only festival that is observed universally throughout Burma. This takes place early in April and celebrates the annual visit of the *Thagya-min* or King of the Devas to inaugurate the new year. The exact day is fixed each year by the astrologers who profess to have intimate knowledge of his plans, and who also announce whether he will stay on the earth for three days or four. Early on the first day crowds repair to the monastery with pots of fresh clear water which are respectfully offered to the monks, then the images at the pagoda are ceremonially washed. After that

the festival becomes one joyous holiday and water is sprinkled or more often thrown over anybody and everybody, the idea behind it being friendliness and cleansing. In former times there was a deeper thought to the festival —children would not fail to visit their parents and sprinkling them with a few drops of water would ask pardon for their negligences of the past year ; a similar thought would lurk behind the offering of water to the monks ; officials and employers would receive visits from their juniors and would be sprinkled with water symbolic of blessing, good-will and respect. But in modern times the festival tends to degenerate into a rollicking time especially for the younger folk, with buckets, hose-pipes, squirts, stirrup pumps all brought into play, with trams, trains, buses, motor-cars as the favourite targets so that on these festival days it is risky to go out unless you are prepared for repeated soakings. But among the Burmans themselves it is all carried on with friendliness and enjoyment, and no one minds getting soaked, for the hot weather has already arrived and there is no fear of catching cold.

The Buddhist Lent always comes in the Rainy Season and to help them to endure the solemn period Burmese Buddhists begin and end it with a great festival. The full moon of Wa-Zo which usually falls in early July marks the beginning of *Wa* or Lent and is a holiday of several days' duration, in which the Buddhist puts on his gayest clothes and goes to the pagoda ; usually he will spend a few minutes in prayer or meditation before an image of the Buddha ; the rest of the day will be spent in seeing the great bamboo and tinsel figures of *nats* or animals which have been specially built for the occasion, in visiting friends, in partaking of the lavish hospitality provided by

generous people, or at night watching a performance of one of the great *zats* or birth-stories of the Buddha.

The end of Lent is marked by the *Thadin-gyut* festival which falls in late September or early October, and is ushered in by a great feasting of the monks and an offering of presents. But the most striking feature of this festival is the myriads of small lanterns with which the monasteries, pagodas and houses are illuminated at night, making an inexpressibly beautiful effect. This Burmese Feast of Lights has as its religious background the commemoration of the Buddha's return from the Tawadeintha heaven when the *devas* lined his route and illuminated the way.

The Buddhists find another occasion for festival in the cremation of any monk of note who has died. The monk does not die as an ordinary man does ; he 'returns' to the highest heaven of *devas* or perhaps even to the immaterial regions of Nibbana. So his funeral is called *pon-gyi-byan*—the return of the great glory, and is an occasion for rejoicing. The monk's body is preserved until an appropriate day has been fixed for the funeral, and in the meantime alms are collected to cover the considerable cost involved. A miniature monastery in bamboo and paper is built, in the centre of which is the funeral pyre, a lofty platform crowned by a seven-roofed spire, the whole erection towering to fifty or sixty feet. The coffin is brought in procession, placed on the platform, and then the pyre is lighted by rockets fired from a distance. When the whole frail erection has been burnt, the few pieces of bones that remain are collected and buried somewhere near the pagoda.

A high light in nearly all these festivals is the performance of one of the great birth-stories of the Buddha.

which tell the story of one of the previous existences before he attained to Buddhahood. There are ten of these great *zats* or *pwes* all of which are well known to Buddhists, and inculcate the ten great virtues to be cultivated by all who are striving to reach Nibbana. These plays are very long and take all night to perform. They are very like the mystery plays of mediaeval times in Europe and combine a good deal of broad humour as well as religious teaching. Nowadays, however, the tendency is to substitute modern plays which have not the same religious interest as the old well-loved birth-stories.

Thus, as Sir George Scott observes, 'the Buddhist faith may be as dreary, without hope, without belief in the world, as many say it is, but no one would imagine it who looks on the gaily-dressed laughing crowd of men and maidens who throng to the pagoda feasts' and Buddhist festivals.

### THE WAY OF REVIVAL

It has often been said that with no definite belief in an Eternal God or an undying personality in man, and with the consequent absence of any worship or prayer, Buddhism is not a religion but a philosophical and ethical system only. A study of Buddhism in Burma tends to confirm that criticism, and the popular aberrations in connection with spirit-worship offer further confirmation. Again the tendency in Burma to emphasise the metaphysical arguments and analyses at the expense of the beautiful moral teaching is disquieting to those who claim Buddhism as a religion.

Buddhists claim that their religion is above all a search for truth and that in its doctrine of causation it anticipated the scientific method. Certainly its robust assertion of the responsibility of the individual for his present state is a healthy rebuff to those who see in their difficulties and trials no personal responsibility but simply the caprice of God or fate. But is not its explanation of suffering too simple and mechanistic? The problems of life are never easy, and the fact remains that we are members one of another and that many suffer through the ignorance, misjudgment or criminal intent of one. Yet Buddhism does insist on the operation of law in the spiritual and moral spheres, and urges the individual to work out his own salvation with diligence.

Inevitably, with the transition from the personal presence of the founder of any religion to the society formed to carry on his message and work, there is a loss of power and understanding; even his wisest and most devoted disciples cannot have the fullness of his spiritual genius and insight. Some kind of organisation is necessary so that his gospel shall not be forgotten, but any ecclesiastical system is bound to lose something of the Teacher's freshness and originality. In times when faith grows dim and practice lax the remedy is to return to the study of the Founder, his mission and teaching. This has been the secret of Christian revivals, notably in the case of Francis of Assisi and John Wesley, and this is the way to new life and inspiration. A more devotional study of the Buddha and his teaching, and its application to personal and national life, would result in spiritual and moral advance.

Burmese Buddhists are very naive in some of their

assertions, and in their trusting acceptance of tradition. Some of them claim a superiority for Buddhism because it has never been attacked by modern criticism in the way that Christianity has. This is only because the time has not yet come ; with the development of education and scientific thought the searchlight of criticism is bound to be turned on the Buddhist Scriptures and traditions, and by their own students. Those who are fearless for truth, as Buddhists claim to be, should welcome a courageous examination of tradition in the light of higher and textual criticism, disregarding the possible vested interests of Sangha or nationalism. Let them get back to the historical Buddha, Gaudama the man, to his original message to some extent preserved in the *Pitakas*, to some extent covered up by them. Let them not be afraid to study the development of Buddhist thought in the Mahayana tradition, for there too will be preserved fragments of an original gospel. Let them not be afraid to study the life and teaching of that other great Blessed One, Jesus of Nazareth, for there is a spiritual kinship between the Buddha and the Christ which their followers have so far failed to recognise. Somewhere in Buddhism there is a gospel, good news for men in general, which has become obscured in the centuries of tradition. Men need not be afraid for the Truth ; it is always greater than they are ; they need not tremble lest criticism should weaken their religion—a true religion must be strong enough to carry its adherents, and not the other way round. And surely the result of such a fearless attitude would be a heightening of the spiritual stature of the Buddha, a deeper appreciation of the power of his message, and a putting into practice of the good life which he lived and taught.

## THE COMING BUDDHA

Burmese Buddhists believe in five Buddhas, of whom Gautama is the fifth and final Buddha still to come. Maitreya, Gaudama Buddha himself, in his biography of this Kindly One, endowed him with a long life, and said that he would not be born again until the world had decayed. In the Burmese tradition the life-span has been amended to 5,000 years, and a new biography has been made in Ceylon.

In Burma this expectation of the coming of the Buddha is very prominent, although in the inscriptions his coming is regarded as the consummation of history ; to behold it is the greatest desire of the devout, to miss it is irretrievable disaster. A Shan monk described the coming of Arimaddeyya in these words : 'As the last Buddha was the Lord of Wisdom, so the next Buddha will be the Lord of Love. The mountains will be leveled, the world become a vast plain full of orchards, ~~gaukus~~, and rice-fields. Man then will be without any enemy among men, and without fear of ravening beasts. It will be the age of plenty and good-will.' Strangely reminiscent of the golden age longed for by the prophet Isaiah.

A deeper regard for this nearly forgotten article of faith, and a new acceptance of the noble ethical teaching of the Buddha, may make the new Burma nearer this ideal.